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Testing ‘cultural reproduction theory’ against relative risk aversion theory – some remarks

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss inherent limitations in certain established, but problematic, conventions for operationalizing and testing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction. These conventions entail a selective focus on the concept of capital at the expense of the concept of habitus. Our point is that blinding out the important concept of habitus amputates the theory, and that a test built upon this limitation is not a test of Bourdieu's theory as a whole, but rather a straw man construction ignoring important parts of the theory. This has strong implications when seeking to test statistically the viability of Bourdieu's theory, particularly vis-a-vis rational choice alternatives, and especially where these limitations are not adequately reflected in the interpretation of results and in conclusions.

Keywords: cultural reproduction; habitus; relative risk aversion; Bourdieu; operationalization; testing

Introduction

Whether Bourdieu's theory is empirically proven remains a contested issue and a topic of much discussion and ongoing testing (Tzanakis, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to question the way Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction is tested in a body of work that employs certain accepted conventions of empirical operationalization of his theory (eg Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007). Our point is that these conventions entail a blinding out of the concept of habitus, and that those tests built upon these conventions are not testing Bourdieu's theory, but rather a theoretical reduction focusing solely on the concept of capital, leading to a biased interpretation of results and, consequently, fallacious conclusions. Our point is in continuation of other similar critiques. One example is Author (2014), who claim that a recent theoretical and empirical recession stems from the concept of capital being treated as a resource *ceteris paribus* independent from a

number of important concepts within Bourdieu's theory, where they also list habitus (2,3, 15).

However, where Author (2014) focus on field, in this paper the focus is on the concept habitus as a crucial dimension in the theory of cultural reproduction.

Habitus has been presented as the least understood and most ignored of Bourdieu's concepts (Mills, 2008). A newly published paper by Friedman (2015) shows how the concept can contribute to a better understanding of social mobility, with a particular focus on how mobility affects the psychic and emotional life of the individual.

In contrast, there is an abundance of papers testing Bourdieu's theory using instead the concept of capital as proxy for the theory (for instance Sullivan, 2001; Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007). For a related discussion of how the concept of habitus is employed within case study approaches, see Glaesser and Cooper (2014). In another paper it is shown how this concept in the empirical treatment itself is often reduced to one of Bourdieu's original three dimensions of the concept (Kraaykamp and Van Eijck, 2010, 209, 210).

As an example of this, we discuss Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's paper (2007) where they reconstruct Bourdieu's theory and test it against the Relative Risk Aversion (RRA) theory. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede are very selective regarding construction of model, reconstruction, operationalization of Bourdieu's theoretical items, the test vis-a-vis RRA theory, and interpretation of data and results. Our argument is that had Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede not blinded out key insights linked to the concept of habitus, results could as well be interpreted in a way that leads to opposite conclusions concerning which of the two theories is supported. Our paper then progresses to a theoretical level, where the root of the problem seems to lie. We contest the widespread notion of an inherent, sharp dichotomy between Bourdieu's theory and rational choice theory, a dichotomy we also recognize in Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's model.

We end by arguing that this has important implications for the whole body of work testing and concluding on the viability of Bourdieu's theory on the basis of these conventions of

operationalization.

Testing the ‘cultural reproduction theory’ versus the relative risk aversion theory

The purpose of Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede’s paper (2007) is to test two competing explanations of educational inequality, on one side what they term the ‘cultural reproduction theory’¹ of Bourdieu and on the other side relative risk aversion theory. These two theories are perceived as representing opposing theories: the still dominant ‘cultural and norm-based theory’, and the ‘rational choice theory’, which has received growing attention in recent years (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 391f). According to the authors, their model testing of the two modes of explanations against each other for the first time combines empirical indicators measuring RRA directly, with ‘...widely used measures of cultural capital’ (392, 395, 397).

The test uses a model constructed around Boudon’s distinction between primary and secondary effects of class on educational outcomes, where primary effects refer to ‘inequalities in terms of early demonstrated academic ability’ and secondary effects refer to ‘educational inequalities that persist after controlling for class differences in ability’ (392). The model links primary effects to cultural capital and the theory of Bourdieu, and secondary effects to ambitions independent of ability, and the RRA theory (392, 395f, 396f).

In Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede’s interpretation of ‘cultural reproduction theory’ they emphasize that cultural capital is of paramount importance in education and school ability, and that it consists of familiarity with the dominant culture of the school and is inherited between generations (393). In their interpretation of RRA theory, they emphasize how members of all social classes strive to avoid downwards social mobility and make rational cost benefits based on choices towards this goal. Two students of equal ability but different social origins are assumed to share the same goal of class maintenance, but because of different class origins, the student of higher social origin has to complete more education to ensure class maintenance, which explains the different

attainment relative to ability of students of different origins (394, 411).

From this model Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede construct various hypotheses through which they test the two theories towards explaining educational performance and ambitions (392, 397). For the test, they employ what they present as a number of broadly accepted conventional measures for cultural capital (parental participation in highbrow culture), social origin (parental education and social class), school performance (self-reported score on the nationally standardized CITO test) and ambitions (secondary school intention relative to current level and aspired achieved schooling at age 30 years) (392, 398ff). They combine these with a measure of relative risk aversion consisting of six Likert-type survey items from an Amsterdam school survey in order to capture the subjective importance of class maintenance, a direct empirical measure of the central assumption of RRA theory. The measure consists of six Likert items about doing worse or better than one's parents (397f, 399, 403).

The results confirm their assumptions. Whereas cultural capital indeed varies with social origin, mobility concerns are equally shared across different backgrounds, thereby confirming the central assumption of RRA (402f). The multivariate analysis predicting performance and ambitions shows that social origin and cultural capital strongly affect school performance, and that relative risk aversion affects schooling ambitions independently of each other (405-9). Overall, Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) conclude that 'cultural reproduction theory' provides an important explanation of class inequalities in early demonstrated ability, but, conversely, that it is not a useful mechanism for explaining secondary effects in the form of future ambitions relative to ability. However, these ambitions are strongly affected by relative risk aversion (411, 412). Consequently, cultural capital explains ability, but relative risk aversion explains effects above ability.

A selective operationalization blinding out the concept of habitus

Even though Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's endeavour initially seems straightforward (2007,

395), we have some critical remarks. Our concern relates to how the test can be said to be a test of cultural reproduction theory when the central concept of habitus is virtually ignored. It is merely touched upon when they describe it as a core element of Bourdieu's theory, where capital is '...expressed in things such as cultural codes, modes of conduct, and use of language', but also 'affects ones "habitus"; one's system of predispositions, including values and motivations' (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 393). However, beyond this brief mention, they leave the concept of habitus out of the actual analysis.

As they explicitly mention habitus as a core element of the theory, the omission of the concept seems not to be theoretically motivated, but rather a consequence of available data and choices made regarding model construction, operationalization, and interpretation of results. For example, Barone (2006, 1045) mentions how clearly available data dictate operationalisations in many cases. But whatever the reasons are, the omission has important theoretical implications.

Selective focus on capital at the level of modelling and operationalization – implicit choices on the level of theory

The complex of concepts comprising both capital and habitus, which in Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's introduction is presented as 'cultural reproduction theory', is in reality on the test level reduced to cultural capital, or to resembling what Goldthorpe (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 11) coins Bourdieu 'domesticated'. To test a domesticated version is legitimate, but as they explicitly define the test as a test of Bourdieu's 'cultural reproduction theory' as such and explicitly mention the concept of habitus (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 391f, 393), the theory in its entirety, and the concept of habitus specifically, must be a relevant reference for assessing the construction of model, operationalization, and interpretation of results.

The problem of the model is that the operationalization of Bourdieu misses the dimension of habitus as a phenomenon above and beyond capital. Through the combination of the selective

operationalization of Bourdieu focusing solely on capital, and the distinction between primary and secondary effects, Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's model leaves any leftover effect to be interpreted as a 'secondary effect' and explained by their operationalization of RRA, and is thus interpreted in support of relative risk aversion theory at the expense of 'cultural reproduction theory' (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 399). They conclude that: 'Aspirations of higher levels of schooling are more clearly formed through concerns with mobility, which forms the core mechanism of relative risk aversion theory' (412). This, however, misses the insight that not only cultural capital is inherited, but also values, motivations and aspirations, and indeed also a distinct way of viewing the world ... 'classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division...' (Bourdieu, 1998, 8), like ways of viewing opportunities and available means – implying a sense of the hierarchy inherent in different educational choices. Thus on a model level in the test of RRA, the small variation across groups is interpreted as support of RRA theory (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 401ff). However, we argue that it could just as well be interpreted as an example of habitus at work as a 'system of predispositions, including values and motivations' (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 393). Even though Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede briefly touch upon such an alternative interpretation², the model, nevertheless, allocates effects as being in support of RRA theory, which could indeed just as well be understood within Bourdieu's theory, had it not in the model been reduced to Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's 'cultural reproduction theory' constructed solely on the concept of capital. Kroneberg and Kalter (2012, 77) also point out that many tests of rational choice theory use concrete models which might as well be said to support competing theories; we find the same problem/phenomenon in Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's paper. In the same vein Fekjaer (2009) formulates the difficulty of finding data which actually cover situations where the competing theories result in opposite predictions (305). Importantly, this point does not rest upon the premise that their case for the RRA explanation in itself is flawed, or that Bourdieu's theory is inherently better, rather that the RRA explanation is not in opposition to the

theory they set out to test it against³ in the way the model implicitly claims, and that thus the test does not amount to a viable test of the latter (compare with Thompson and Simmons' (2013) similar discussion, but without claiming to test the two theories against each other) .⁴

Rational choice (RRA) explanations vs. Bourdieu – a questionable theoretical juxtaposition

In pursuing our critical point on a theoretical level, we should like to question the soundness of what we perceive as a widespread notion of an inherent, sharp dichotomy between Bourdieu's theory and rational choice theory, a dichotomy we also recognize in Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's model (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007). On the theoretical level Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede introduce 'cultural reproduction theory' and RRA theory as competing explanations, belonging to two fundamentally different traditions (2007, 391f). However, we argue that this is not an inherently reasonable, logical dichotomy. On the contrary, their juxtaposition of the two is only possible through an operationalization of Bourdieu ignoring the concept of habitus (see Ermakoff, 2013 for a similar discussion). The RRA theory rests on an assumption that striving towards class maintenance is a universal phenomenon, but one could equally well argue that since class maintenance is relative to social origin, the phenomenon is just as congruent with habitus as a 'system of predispositions' (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007, 393). Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's interpretation blinds out that within both theories there is an element of rational calculation and an element of social context, implying '...an estimation of chances which assumes the transformation of the past effect into the expected objective' (Bourdieu, 1977, 76).⁵

Conclusions

Our point regarding Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's model is that it implicitly allocates effects as being in support of RRA theory, which could equally well be understood within Bourdieu's theory.

Our point is that their overall test model of juxtaposing the two modes of explanation entails a reconstruction of the theory of Bourdieu so selective that ultimately it does not test the theory of Bourdieu as outlined in their introduction, but rather a theoretical straw man relying on a theoretically questionable juxtaposition of the theories.

Perhaps more importantly, we see this as a problem with implications for the entire body of work aimed at testing the theory of Bourdieu. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007, 92) thus exactly motivate their choices regarding operationalization of the theory by referring to ‘widely used measures of cultural capital’ in research. These conventions may well be motivated because of difficulties of operationalizing habitus and limitations of available data (see also Van de Werfhorst [2010, 158] on the difficulties of operationalizing habitus). However, if it is limitations in available data, intrinsic or not, that result in a selective operationalization blinding out the concept of habitus, we feel that it is of paramount importance that research at least in the interpretations of results and conclusions remains sensitive to the insights of habitus and reflects upon the discrepancy between data and theory, so as to assess theory not just in the form of a theoretically amputated straw man, but instead be unbiased and loyal to the theory in its entirety, including all its central concepts and the insights they provide.

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Notes

1. In the paper 'cultural reproduction theory' refers to Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede's interpretation.
2. Thus Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede point to Need and De Jong using an operationalization of school ambitions as an operationalization of habitus (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007: 395).
3. It may be simpler, but that still does not justify the false juxtaposition of the theories.
4. But that being said, and looking at Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede's results (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007: 408f), one could speculate whether other measures of 'cultural reproduction theory', which included the mechanisms of habitus, might not intermediate the effect of social origin on educational choices.
5. Even further, the measure of RRA could also be viewed as being influenced by different understandings of context and concepts because of differences in habitus. However, for now, we will leave this obvious point.